

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, 2010
1st Presbyterian Church, Bemidji
Mark 13:24-37

CHRISTMAS MUSIC

At the beginning of today's service we lit an Advent candle. It is a sign that things are changing and that something awesome is about to happen. There are preparations to be made. We are getting ready for Christmas and here in the church even our Presbyterian plainness begins to take on a blush of color.

I have a wonderful friend, a magnificently gracious lady, who lives here in Bemidji. She is an Episcopalian, and when the weather is suitable she comes down to Park Rapids to worship in our Episcopal and Presbyterian church. She is also a musician and sometimes serves as our organist. The love of music, especially church music, is something that resonates between us. A week or so ago she sent me a book. It is a series of Advent meditations organized around the theme of music – the great music that over the centuries this holy season has produced. And so that gracious gift from a gracious person has prompted me to think about this Advent season, its moods and its message, as music.

We are getting ready for Christmas and there is music in the air; but on this first Sunday, the mood is more solemn. The cadences are not the piping of a Christmas carol, but the deep and powerful resonances of a great organ. Its chords and cadences are solemn.

Its imagery is awesome.

Its vision is both terrible and majestic,

And it ends on a powerful note of hope.

Listen, then, to the Gospel. Listen to the words of Jesus:

*But in those days, after that suffering
 The sun will be darkened,
 And the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven,
 And the powers in the heavens will be shaken.*

*Then they will see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.
 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the
 ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.*

Jesus recites the words of the prophets and claims the vision as his own. It is a vision that takes in the whole expanse of creation in both space and time. It expresses the most mind-numbing fears and exalted hopes of humankind. It is the alpha and omega of time itself – the beginning and end of all things. It is the great Amen of the immensity that is God.

Henri Nouwen is a Catholic priest from The Netherlands, and he tells about the Advent season he spent in Bolivia. Bolivia is south of the equator, so the seasons are reversed from the way we know them. Our winter is their summer and their summer is our winter. Nouwen says,

In Bolivia, the Advent symbols are different from those I am used to. In the past, Advent always meant to me the shortening of days, the approach of winter and the time in which nature became darker and colder until the day of light. But now I have to learn to wait for the coming of the Lord while spring becomes summer and the light increases day by day. . . . Now Advent means a time of blossoming trees and first fruits. And so the symbols of Easter become the symbols of Christmas.

We think of Advent as a warm-up exercise for Christmas, and so it is; but it is more than that, much more. South America gave Father Nouwen a different view, and his perception is true regardless of geography: The symbols of Easter are enfolded in Advent, because Advent rehearses the entire mystery of the Gospel itself, the mystery of faith, Christ was born, Christ died, Christ risen, Christ will come again.

So Advent recognizes two arrivals- two “comings”: the birth of Jesus as a tiny helpless and vulnerable baby; and his coming again in glory as the holy and living God. Let me suggest two things, two kinds of activity that for Christians set this holy season apart:

It is a time of waiting and preparation;

and,

It is a season of hope and expectation.

Waiting is something we all do. We wait at the clinic. We wait at the post office. We wait at the top light and the check-out counter. We wait for an answer to our letter. We wait for our great-grandchild to be born; and we wait for our lives to end. We probably spend more time waiting than in anything else that we do. The difference in the quality of our lives is how well we spend the waiting times. Waiting is the time we use to prepare for whatever comes next, and we are constantly warned to use it wisely.

Advent, for Christians, is that interval in the cycle of the year when it is important that we step back from the frantic round of activity and wait. It is a time amidst all the pressure of deadlines to pause a moment and “wait upon the Lord.” It is a time to drop out, if only for a minute, and think about the Christ who is to come. Who is to come in the quiet joys recalling Jesus’ modest and homely birth. Who is to come when Christ the eternal Lord gathers to himself you and me and all God’s creation. That is preparation for Christmas.

June, Mrs. House, my wife of nearly 61 years is what I would modestly call a reasonably good watercolor artist. She has painted a picture that will be featured on our Christmas greeting-card if I get around to printing it. The picture is titled, *Waiting for Santa*, and it is of a child, a little girl, asleep in a rocking-chair next to a fireplace where her still-empty stocking has been hung, and where sleep has overtaken her in spite of her intentions. I have been trying to find a religious metaphor in this purely secular art work. The best I can do is to cite that great Lutheran hymn (and Bach motet) *Sleepers, wake for night is flying*. Be it so, it is the children who probably have the best sense of expectant waiting; and even as I say that, I think of those, both children and adults who have no expectations, only hope.

Advent is not merely about waiting. It is about hopeful waiting, waiting in the expectation that something overwhelmingly glorious is going to happen. Paul says it in the letter to the Romans that was the Epistle lesson today:

“Now is the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is far gone, the day is near. . . . therefore put on the armor of light.”

We live in a dark world in a dark time. We are surrounded by men and women and children who have nothing other than dimming hopes. I suspect that it is the ones who suffer – whatever the pain or distress or anxiety – it is they who are best able to judge the quality of hope. It is hope, after all, that makes it possible for people to live from day to day. It is the church’s work, your work, my work, our ministry to hold out to the hopeless, in every way we can, the hope of this blessed season. Our faith is that the solution to gloom and doom is the hope that is to be found in Christ, the Christ who is to come, the immortal, invisible light, through whom the redemption of the whole creation becomes possible.

The church’s oldest, most original creed and its only sermon was four sentences: Christ was born, Christ died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Advent breathes in all its power in the prayer that closes John’s book of Revelation, the very last words in the Bible: “The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus.”

Even so, Come, Lord Christ.